



INFLUENCE AND TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICAN ART DIASPORA

The word Diaspora in the context of this paper refers to the descendents of the African continent found in North and South America and in the islands of the Atlantic Ocean. African retentions in the artistic manifestations can be traced back to the early years of slavery into contemporary art. The height of interest in and the study of African artistic retentions in the African Diaspora, occurred predominately in the 1960's when there was a resurgence of interest in Africa because of the civil rights movement and the beginning of independence of many African nations from colonial rule. Many times the parallels between traditional and contemporary African art and that of the Diaspora are not apparent for much of the artistic heritage which survived the forced migration to the New Worlds has been lost in the course of history since artists were not often permitted to show direct lineage to their African culture. Within the context of the African Diaspora of the United States, early retentions can be seen in the iconography of traditional walking canes from the south, in dress, in architecture, and in the decorative arts of ceramics, wrought iron designs, and furniture.

Robert Farris Thompson (1983 and 2005) has spent much of his life studying the visual arts of the African Diaspora. His focus has been for the most part on relationship between

Yoruba and Kongo culture and African-American culture of the United States. Thompson speaks of the formal connections between figurative pottery vessels used in Africa and Toby jugs used by African-American slaves at burial sites. He speaks of the similarities in the metal motifs of African and African-American blacksmiths. In addition, he speaks of symbols and gestures that are common to both the Africans and those of the Diaspora.

Many of the above mentioned visual elements have long been lost, however, the aesthetic power of African art still remains with many African Diaspora artists through out the Americas. The most noted and earliest examples of African inspired art among African-American artists in the United States dates back to 1921 when Meta Warrick Fuller, a Philadelphian, exhibited a sculptural piece entitled *Ethiopia Awakening* at the S. Bing's Galerie L'Art Nouveau in Paris, France. *Ethiopia Awakening* was a response to the pleas of the intelligentsia that proclaimed the spiritual and political relevance of Africa for African Americans." (Williams, 2006) When she returned to the United States the following year, she continued to create works whose themes reflected African folk tales and rituals, thereby setting an example for other black American artists to emulate. Africa became the unifying

theme among many artists of the Harlem Renaissance (1920's and 1930's). Aaron Douglas, for example, in the New Negro Movement of the 1920s created images, such as *In Bondage* (1936) that made use of stylistic language strongly influenced by African flat patterns and designs. Others followed, Louis Mailou Jones' with *The Ascent of Ethiopia*, 1932, and Palmer Hayden with *Blue Nile*.

The African impulse as a transformative element of African-American art in the US continued into 1968 with the Afri-Cobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) group out of Chicago. This group of artists, which included artist such as Jeff Donaldson and Wadsworth and Jay Jarrell, the founders of the movement and others such as Napoleon Henderson, Michael Harris, Nelson Stevens, Ron Anderson, Frank Smith, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Carol Lawrence, Murray DePillars, Omar Lama, and Sherman Beck, utilized Art as a medium to promote political and functional growth of Africanized thought throughout the world. The movement became the visual component of the Black cultural revolution of the 60's and 70's. The philosophical concepts of Afri-Cobra focused on "a humanist orientation, design sensibilities that used African prototypes as reference, agendas that fostered liberation and solidarity throughout the African Diaspora, and an art of 'expressive awesomeness'" (Powell, 1997, p145). They wanted to impose a new visual reality on the world, and in the process, move the audience to a more profound realization.

The work of Jeff Donaldson (1932-2004), the co-founder of the Afri-Cobra movement, initially drew from the vibrant colors and patterns found in African cloth. His piece entitled *Victory in Zimbabwe* is a perfect example of the emphasis on African pattern paintings that were so much a part of the Afri-Cobra aesthetics. Later his work made reference to the Yoruba orisha, Shango and Eshu. Okediji (2003) explains that a number of African-American artist were attracted to the visual elements that were connected with these

orisha because they related concepts of force, power, and a fiery temper associate with the spirit and those were excellent vehicles for conveying ideas. Donaldson for example in his silkscreen print entitled *Victory in the Valley of Eshu* uses the double axe symbol of Shango and the eye of Eshu.

By the 70s even more African-American artists were traveling to West Africa. As a matter of fact a flood of African-American artist visited West Africa. Artists such as John Biggers, Pheoris West, and Ed Sarrells-Adevala and many more not only visited the continent but participated in cultural events and workshops with West African artists. Harris (1997) feels that these visits culminated in FESTAC (second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977 and "led to the development of a new aesthetic based more on patterns than the reinterpretation of objects" (p38).

African sensibility in the visual arts did not stop with the Black revolution movement of the 60s, it continues today in the works of more contemporary artists such as Rene Stout, David Hammon, and others. But the sensitivity has changed from one that focused on the appropriation of imagery and superficial poaching to one that emphasizes the redefinition of their cultural legacy through informed hybridization.

Those artists that have ventured into these new waters come with a new visual language that is fueled by a greater knowledge of African cultures and geography. Now, in addition to possibly being influenced or transformed by aesthetic possibilities, artists are more interested in African conceptual and philosophical notions. They are merging these notions to enrich their work. They seek to send messages of healing and self-development, very much in the same way that traditional African art sent and sends messages of the same. Okediji calls this auto-hegemony, art, which is oriented towards healing and self-development (Okediji, 2003). While some artists focus only on direct visual statements, others look to form as a way of expressing the philosophical and

psychological essence of the African spirit. An understanding of African art is therefore essential in the quest to comprehend the art works that are a part of this auto-hegemony category and are being produced by a number of contemporary African-American artists who are following their own post-modern impulse.

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